

## FIRE! – A Good Thing for Natural Communities

The fresh scent of pine. Dense, green foliage. This is what you probably expect when hiking in Florida’s pinelands. Occasionally, though, you may stroll into the charred remains of yesterday’s woods. But don’t be shocked or alarmed: In Florida, a burned landscape can be both natural and healthy!

Whether started by lightning or by people in “prescribed burns,” fire is a force that shapes our landscape. Most natural communities in Florida need fire to remain healthy and productive. Native plants and animals are accustomed to fire and thrive

in recently-burned areas. Fire is a natural cleanser – removing debris and giving new plants room to grow.

In the past, lightning-sparked fires might burn freely for days or weeks across many square miles of Florida terrain. Spring and summer fire cycles were often repeated in various areas of the region. Today such wildfires can no longer be allowed to roam because of the potential danger to communities and businesses located close to our region’s remaining “wild” lands. Instead, controlled burns are carried out to mimic the natural fire process.

At the South Florida Water Management District, land managers use prescribed or controlled burns on District-owned, water-resource lands to enhance the land’s ecological values and lessen the possibility of wildfire by reducing fuel loads in overgrown areas. Planning is the key to a safe burn. Florida law requires a burn plan for each prescribed fire, along with a trained, state-certified crew leader to direct the burn.

“One way or another we’re going to have fire; the question is whether it will be controlled or uncontrolled,” said Fred Davis, director of the District’s Land Stewardship Division. Davis said three out of the last four fire seasons in Florida have been serious, with a high potential for damage to property and wildlife. “Fire becomes a much more important element with increased urbanization,” he said.

Before a controlled burn is started, weather-related safety factors like wind speed and direction are considered. Then fire lines are prepared around the site to contain burning. The District tries to use wetlands or roads as natural fire breaks. After the fire is set, the fire crew stands ready to quickly douse unwanted sparks. Crew members communicate with each other and the “burn boss” by radio, and the Florida Division of Forestry is immediately notified if emergency fire suppression is needed.



Controlled burns (above and at left) are planned so that winds are less likely to carry smoke over communities, and to keep fire within carefully selected natural boundaries.



David Birdsall, a senior land steward with the District, has been a burn boss for the last four years. “Prescribed fire is the most effective and least expensive

protection against wildfires,” said Birdsall. He is quick to note that “protecting people, houses, and forest is a priority for land stewardship staff.”

Prescribed fires are planned to rejuvenate and perpetuate fire-adapted communities. They are generally slow-moving, relatively cool fires – giving animals time to simply scurry away or use burrows as the fire passes. That’s why fires during the ground-nesting season for birds are usually avoided – to protect nests. Great care is also taken to minimize any temporary inconvenience and danger from smoke and ash, which can decrease visibility on roads.

Burned areas are green and growing again within a few months and are soon able to support the habitat’s rich diversity of plants and animals.

### C R E D I T S

*WaterMatters* is produced by the South Florida Water Management District’s Department of Public Information to inform the public about District projects and programs. An internet version is also available in English and Spanish at [www.sfwmd.gov](http://www.sfwmd.gov)

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*The South Florida Water Management District is a regional, governmental agency that oversees the water resources in the southern half of the state. It is the oldest and largest of the state’s five water management districts.*

*Our mission is to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems, and water supply.*

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*Question selected from District letters and emails received from the public.*

**Q** Can I pay my water or sewer bill on your web site, or at one of your offices?

**A** No, sorry, you can’t. Why? The South Florida Water Management District manages and regulates regional water resources (lakes, well fields and aquifers, rivers and wetlands). But we play no part in treating, delivering, testing or billing for drinking water or sewage services for either homes or businesses.

If you check out your bill, you will see that this service is provided by some unit of local government. Check with the city, town and/or county that is listed on your bill as providing your drinking water. Many do have web sites or local offices that can help you.

You can find links to a great number of cities and counties in the state at the following web sites:

[www.myflorida.com/myflorida/counties.html](http://www.myflorida.com/myflorida/counties.html)  
[www.myflorida.com/myflorida/cities.html](http://www.myflorida.com/myflorida/cities.html)

### Who is Freddy?

His full name is “Freddy the Friendly Alligator.” He is the South Florida Water Management District’s mascot.

You may have seen him on the signs that mark the region’s canals and rivers.

Alligators are nature’s water managers, and are what most people picture when they think about Florida. Alligators dig deep holes in the swamp where they “hang out.” When drought strikes, these “gator holes” provide water and food (fish, turtles, insects) for many other species such as wading birds. At the same time, any creature sharing the alligator’s territory could become its lunch! That’s why people should remember that alligators are wild animals which should be admired, but also avoided.

make waves for  
**WaterFest  
2003**

Saturday, March 8, 2003, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.

**South Palm Beach County Regional Park and  
Coconut Cove Waterpark & Recreational Center  
11200 Park Access Road, Boca Raton**

*See story inside*



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☐ Delete me from the list ☐ Receiving duplicate copies\*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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We appreciate any newsletter comments you may have:

\_\_\_\_\_

Return this card to:

Department of Public Information  
South Florida Water Management District  
P.O. Box 24680  
West Palm Beach, FL 33416-4680

\* For changes/duplications – It would help if you cut out or copied the incorrect name/address on your newsletter and noted the changes directly on the printed label.

